

**Freedom of Information and Journalistic Content
in Western Australia and Sweden**

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Abstract

In this paper, we look at how different Freedom of Information (FoI) provisions in Sweden and Australia (specifically Western Australia) may impact on the quality of news reportage in the two countries. While there is an extensive literature on FoI itself, very little work has looked at its impact on print-media news. So, after considering this very scant literature, we move on to discuss the different (Swedish and Australian) FoI regimes in general. Then, the core part of the study involves findings from an ongoing research project which compares parallel one-month samples of articles from a Swedish and a WA newspaper.

Introduction

In his extensive comparative work on Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation in different countries, Marsh introduces the concept of FoI as follows:

There are two somewhat different reasons why it may be said that the citizens of a democracy ought to be informed about the operations of the executive government. The first is because it is feared that any government, if it is allowed to work in secrecy, will abuse the power entrusted to it. The second reason is simply that openness of the governmental processes is essential to good governments (Marsh 1987, 2).

Or, as the former United States President James Madison put it in 1822 when he chaired the committee which drafted the First Amendment to the US constitution:

Knowledge will for ever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy or perhaps both (Supperstone and Pitt-Payne 2001, v)

These are bold words considering the present information climate in which governments, the corporate sector and others are increasingly trying to control and sanitise both information flow and content. FoI, as part of the fabric of democracy, is illusive. When it is working, it is often taken for granted; when it is not working, the public will, most likely, note a change in the quality of information relayed by the media. During his first few years as a newsroom journalist in Sweden, one of the authors of this paper did what everyone else seemed to do – took the extensive FoI laws for granted. They were there; they worked and rarely were FoI requests rejected. His first six months as a freelance journalist in Australia in 1994 was, by comparison, a culture shock. The study described in this paper was partly prompted by this clash of FoI regimes.

The overarching research question in this study is: to what extent, if at all, do the different FoI regimes in Sweden and WA influence journalistic content? The methodology used here is a combination of quantitative and qualitative content

analyses of a Swedish and a Western Australian newspaper. The data were entered into the QSR NUD•IST (N5) qualitative relational database software, creating a database consisting of 88 articles.

The general answer to the research question is that there is a difference in journalistic content between the two newspapers in the study. The difference manifests itself most clearly in the method used by reports to source the information conveyed in their articles. The Swedish journalists' main sourcing method is to paraphrase documents acquired from government agencies using FoI, while the Western Australian journalists depend equally heavily on paraphrasing oral sources. The implications of this are discussed in the conclusion of this report.

It is also relevant to point out that this paper describes the last of a series of studies conducted using the two newspapers. The first two studies examined what impact the different FoI laws have on journalistic practice in Sweden and WA. The methodology used in the first two studies involved surveys, interviews and observations of the two newsrooms. Overall, the findings of all three studies triangulate with each other.¹

Literature review

The literature review for this study was undertaken with the background knowledge of the literature review for the thesis mentioned in note 1. One of the present authors (Lidberg) has eight years experience as a newsroom journalist, editor and chief of staff and knows from first-hand experience that FoI is an integral part of journalism practice in Sweden. It would seem logical, then, that extensive studies of this would have been done and hence a substantial number of publications would be available. Yet this is not the case. In the lead up to Sweden joining the European Union (EU) in 1995, there were relatively widespread discussions among journalists and some researchers attempting to estimate the impact on Swedish FoI. The SJF, the Swedish Union of Journalists, did conduct a few informal surveys of its membership regarding the importance of FoI to Swedish journalists, but the methodology used lacked in rigour and the findings were never formally published. We have searched extensively for publications on

¹. A complete description and analysis of these three studies can be found in Johan Lidberg's forthcoming MA thesis in the school of Media Communication & Culture at Murdoch University. These studies are the source of basic information about print journalism and FoI in Sweden and WA referred to throughout this paper.

journalistic practice and FoI in Sweden and have confirmed with one of Sweden's leading journalism scholars, Jan Stridh at the University of Gothenburg, that no such studies have been undertaken, which strengthens the legitimacy and relevance of this study. However, it is clear that the general issue of openness and FoI laws is regarded as important. The SJF has been and still is a strong lobby group and is currently trying to export the Swedish version of FoI to the EU generally (SJF 2001, 2).

The Swedish research situation is to some extent mirrored in Australia. One of the few references we have found to earlier comparable studies was in article by Snell where he argues that 'the Australian media is at best a de facto and largely non-participating member of the FoI constituency in Australia' (Snell 1998, 83). This argument relies on earlier studies — by Waters (1996; see Snell 1998, 81-82) — showing the relatively low-level use of FoI by Australian journalists compared, for instance, to colleagues in the United States. However, we could find no references whatsoever to studies dealing specifically with the extent to which Australian or Swedish journalists use FoI to acquire sources for the information included in articles.

FoI in Sweden and WA

In order to make sense of the findings of this study, it is essential to first provide a background to FoI in Sweden and Western Australia (WA). It should be pointed out that, since one of the newspapers in the study, The West Australian, operates in WA, this study is principally concerned with the FoI legislation in that particular state.

In a speech on the future of FoI, the Western Australian FoI commissioner, Bronwyn Keighley-Gerardy, describes FoI legislation as being built around three principles (Keighley-Gerardy 2001, 1):

The first one is concerned with human rights and privacy. It enables people to gain access to information about themselves and to correct that information if necessary. The second is the principle of accountability and it seeks to open govern processes to public scrutiny to facilitate efficiency and competency in decision-making. The third principle is that of democratic participation to allow public

participation in the policy process and in government itself (emphasis added).

The first principle relating to human rights and privacy has been, and is in most cases, fulfilled in WA (Walker 1999, 7). It is the second principle, relating to more general openness and accountability for the state agencies and politicians, that is a sticking point. In theory, any and every member of the public could set out to scrutinise government by using FoI. However, in practice, this task is most often undertaken by journalists. One could argue that fulfilment of the second principle is essential for the fulfilment of the third, democratic participation; the argument being that individual citizens will rarely have the time or energy to scrutinise the agencies via FoI. Instead, some sort of representative is needed to find (and supply citizens with) relevant information to enable them to participate to a greater extent in political processes.

The Swedish FoI legislation is built around the same principles but is more extensive. This is how the Swedish government put the matter in a preliminary document that laid the foundation for the modern version of FoI, which has its roots in the first freedom of the press legislation from 1766.

What goes on in government agencies is a concern for all citizens. Hence, in a society run by the people, it is inevitable that [government] agencies provide citizens with extensive information regarding how they are run.... It is also important that agencies are open for citizens and media organisations in a way that enables them to access information of their own choice and independently of the information policies adopted by the agencies (Sefastsson 2000, 11; emphasis added).

One of the main points of difference between the legislations is that the Swedish legislation clearly states that it is an end in itself to enable any Swedish citizen to access information in an independent fashion, regardless of what the individual agency may think of it. Arguably, the principle of scrutiny of the public sector has been clearly built into the law, to such an extent that even non-Swedish citizens (such as foreign correspondents in Sweden) can access documents under the FoI legislation. When Sweden joined the EU in 1995, Swedish government agencies got full access to the EU bureaucracy and were put in the loop of information circulating among member countries. In the first few months, there were numerous examples of journalists from other EU countries travelling to Stockholm specifically to access documents from Swedish agencies that they

could not access in Brussels or other EU countries. This is still a point of controversy between Stockholm and Brussels.

It is also relevant to point out that Swedish FoI legislation rests on a very firm legal base, as it is part of the Swedish constitution consisting of four separate laws known collectively as ‘The Instrument of Government’. This makes changing FoI legislation in Sweden a complex and lengthy process. (The changes have to be passed by two separate parliaments; so in practice, a general election has to be held before the laws can be changed.) As such, this works as a safeguard against the government of the day finding FoI too extensive and wanting to change it. Table 1 provides an overview of the main points of difference between the FoI legislations in WA and Sweden.

Table 1: Differences between FoI in WA and Sweden

Western Australia	Sweden
History 1992 – FoI legislation in WA	1766 – First FoI related legislation in Sweden
Cost \$ 30/ FoI request fee/copy	Free First ten photocopies free. From 10th copy 36 cents/copy
Procedure Written request	Oral request (in most cases)
Slow – access to documents 1-6 months	Fast – same day access in most cases
No archive index	Archive index – provides overview of all documents within an agency
Blanket exemptions for some agencies	No blanket exemptions
Secrecy (Government of WA, 1996)	Openness (Sefastsson, 2000)

In WA, FoI has only recently been introduced. In Sweden the first FoI-related legislation was passed in 1766, which means that a tradition of open government

has had a long time to penetrate the public service, politics, journalism, and indeed most levels of society. The mindset within the public service therefore tends to be positive, with public servants acting as facilitators rather than gatekeepers.

In WA, accessing information through FoI is a costly and time-consuming process. In Sweden, there is no application fee and the request process is quick and informal. In most cases, an oral request is sufficient. The only cost arises if journalists need more than ten photocopies of a document or if the information is in audio or video format.

One of the more interesting features of FoI administration in Sweden is that according to one of the Swedish FoI laws, the Offentlighetsprincipen ('principle of openness', or 'public access to documents'), each agency is obliged to keep a running index of its archive. This is a valuable journalistic tool, since it provides an overview of what is archived. In the index, each document is allocated a number, the date, the name of the public servant handling the issue and a brief summary of the contents of the document. This makes locating documents in Swedish government agencies simple and swift. It is also worth noting that the Swedish FoI legislation has no blanket exemptions for any agencies (Gustafsdotter 2000, 34). By contrast, the WA FoI Act exempts a number of agencies as specified in Schedule Two. A few prominent examples are: The Governor and the Governor's establishment, The Anti-Corruption Commission, The Director of Public Prosecutions and The Internal Investigations Unit of Corrective Services. In all, 17 government agencies are exempt from the WA FoI Act (Government of WA 1992, 70-81).

The following example illustrates how a political reporter in Sweden would typically get information from the Swedish equivalent of the WA Premier's office. In the Premier's office, the reporter would find two binders with the Premier's incoming and outgoing mail. In the vicinity, there would be a photocopier for public use to copy relevant correspondence. An index list of what has been archived in the last three weeks would be available. Should the reporter want to delve further into the index, a public computer would usually be provided. The index would cover all archived documents, including those that are potentially not 'public'. The reporter may, for instance, decide to investigate how the Premier uses the travel account. That archive index could be found in the economics department and, among other things, would contain summaries of travel destinations. After an hour of going through the different indexes, the reporter

might have a list of between 5 and 15 documents that he or she would like to have copies of. The next stop would then be the central archive where the reporter presents the list to a public servant who immediately locates the documents. In cases where the documents cannot be found straight away, the reporter would get the documents faxed to the newsroom within a few hours.

The Swedish FoI legislation does not specify the procedures described in the above example. Rather, this journalistic practice has simply become part of the professional culture; it has evolved based on, and because of, the far-reaching FoI Acts in Sweden. Another example of how the interpretation of Swedish FoI is constantly evolving is a case that went to the High Court of administrative appeals. A journalist asked the Swedish equivalent of a city mayor to see the index of his e-mail inbox to determine which e-mails were sent to him in his capacity as mayor in order to obtain copies of these e-mails. The mayor refused. The court ruled in favour of the reporter and that ruling is now used as precedent (Government of Sweden 1997).

If the above example were transposed to WA, the outcome would most likely be as follows. The political reporter would get a summary of the Premier's activities for the coming week from the press secretary or press liaison officer. The reporter would not be allowed to read the Premier's in-and out-going mail and he or she would not find an archive index. In short, the information a Swedish reporter can gather independently in a matter of hours would take a Western Australian reporter, in most cases, months to access. According to the WA FoI Act, the maximum time for an agency to respond to a request is 45 days (Government of WA 1996, 23). In cases where access is denied, the appeal process can extend this to several months. To this it should be added that there is a \$30 application fee for each request, along with any possible charges an agency sees fit to impose for processing.

The Information Commissioner in WA identifies the public crisis in confidence during the 1980s concerning actions of the government and certain government agencies as the driving force behind the emergence of FoI legislation in WA (Keighly-Gerardy 2001, 2). She also poses a very important question: 'why is it that a system based on an enforceable legal right that seems to promise so much actually delivers so little?' And she provides one of the answers herself:

FoI legislation is expected to change the relationship between the government and its citizens. However, the access regimes introduced under FoI, first by the Commonwealth in 1982, and by each State since

then have been, in the main, designed by the bureaucrats for the bureaucrats. Is it any wonder then that those frameworks actually introduce more ‘red-tape’ to preserve and maintain the status quo rather than to serve any other democratic ideals? Recent reports seem to confirm what many users of FoI have been saying since day one: the systems are not working the way they were intended (Keighly-Gerardy 2001, 2).

With this in mind, it could be argued that Sweden and WA have gone down very different paths in defining the importance of FoI and openness in the workings of democracy. The Swedish version is that the freest possible flow of government information is a safeguard against corruption and abuse of power. Whereas WA legislators seem to subscribe to the Sir Humphrey doctrine (from the BBC Television series Yes Minister): ‘Minister, you can govern and you can have openness, but you can’t have both’. As we will see, this has an impact on the content in the two newspapers analysed in this study. However, we want to make it clear that this study was not designed to identify the ‘better’ system. Rather, it was designed to attempt to identify differences in journalistic content that can be connected to the different FoI laws in the countries of study.

Methodology

The overall methodology used in this study is a well-trialled and used one: content analyses of news articles. However, in order to answer the over-arching research question – to what extent, if any, do the different FoI laws in Sweden and WA influence journalistic content? – we had to extemporise on the tired-and-trusted tropes of content analysis and so, to some extent, the present paper also offers a novel methodology for a basic assessment of journalistic content. Accordingly, we used measures of ‘confidence in sourcing’ on the part of journalists as just one indicator of informational content. Hence, our sub-question was: In what ways, if any, does information acquired using FoI laws influence the sourcing of information in the two papers?

The questions are of both a quantitative and a qualitative nature with slightly more emphasis on the latter. Our aim was therefore to design a study that was quantitative in nature but that could be used for a qualitative analyses. Here, we found Riffe et al’s definition of quantitative content analyses instructive.

Quantitative content analyses is the systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analyses of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption (1998, 20).

We are unsure if Riffe et al would agree but, in our view, this definition also contains elements of qualitative analysis And this is the main reason for combining the two methods. The quantitative method provides the foundation for the qualitative analyses (cf McHoul 2001).

Nya Wermlandstidningen (NWT) is the largest newspaper in the region of Värmland, Dalarna and Dalsland in the south west of Sweden close to the Norwegian border. It has a circulation of 61 100 copies per day (Nya Wermlandstidningen 2001) and employs 35 full-time journalists. NWT's head office is located in Karlstad, the regional capital. The population in the region is close to 275,000 people. Considering Sweden's total population of 8.9 million, the relative comparison to Western Australia works well. Apart from geographical size and the fact that NWT has a competing newspaper in the region, Värmland is, in Swedish terms, a relatively isolated region still highly dependent on 'smokestack' industries. The West Australian (TWA) has a circulation of 220,000 copies Monday to Friday and 390,000 for the weekend edition (The West Australian 2001). Thirty-five journalists work in the Perth newsroom. Both papers are morning papers with a six day/week circulation. NWT officially declares itself as 'independent conservative' (Nya Wermlandstidningen 2001). The current newspaper situation in Australia does not call for equivalent declarations – however, not many arguments would be raised against attaching the same 'independent conservative' label to TWA as well. So, the two papers compare well on a number of levels.

- Editorial aims
- Population: the Värmland region contain 3% of the Swedish population (275,000/8.9 million) WA is home to 6% of the Australian population (1.2 million/19 million)
- Circulation: NWT attracts 22% of the population in the region as readers; TWA 18%

NWT and TWA both put out 288 issues each per year. Analysing that number of issues was too large (cf Neuman 2000, 292), so after consulting earlier content analysis studies, one month, 24 issues, of each paper was arrived at as an appropriate basis for analyses. The month of October 2001 was chosen for several reasons. The main incentive was to identify a 'normal' news month in both countries. For climatic reasons, the holiday seasons are opposite in Sweden and WA and therefore the slow news periods of the year differ. In Sweden it is between June and August; in WA the slow news period occurs between December and February. The scope for choice was between March and May or August and November. The latter period is slightly longer, so the choice of October seemed to be the most obvious.

The research question determined the sample of articles drawn from the sample month. From the earlier studies mentioned in above, it was clear that the journalists at NWT used FoI laws as a professional tool to gather information to a far greater extent than their colleagues at TWA. Therefore the first sample of articles had to be drawn from NWT. There were two options in identifying articles based on information acquired using FoI: firstly, to ask each reporter if FoI laws were used for the information gathering, or secondly, identifying from the text itself if this was the case. The first option, albeit more comprehensive, was considered too time-consuming. The second required a reader of the articles with the appropriate background knowledge to be able to identify the articles. One of the authors has eight years experience working in both newspaper and broadcast newsrooms in Sweden, which has provided him with sufficient experience to do identify relevant articles. The method used is based on references in the text as to where the information came from. One example is from an article dealing with the suggested privatisation of a public hospital:

The core of the proposal is to let an external health company run Torsby Hospital. The hospital is currently managed in an independent fashion by staff employed by Landstinget [the regional political body for health matters]. In his letter to Landstinget's director of health services, Lennart Nordström, Kjell-Åke Lantz points out that the companies Capio and Praktikertjänst, have indicated interest in managing the most notherly hospital in Värmland. This is confirmed in a letter from Capio's CEO, Stanley Broden, that Landstinget received yesterday (Rothsten 2001, 9; emphasis added).

In order to qualify for inclusion in the FoI-based article sample, the stories had to contain references (as exemplified above in italics) which clearly show that the reporter had originals or copies of the document in his or her possession. The only way this can happen is via use of FoI or a leak. However, in Sweden, there is no reason for the information to be leaked since the reporter could simply pick up the letters in his or her daily round of reading the mail and archive index at Landstinget. Forty-four NWT articles, including the one above, were identified. To verify the selection method, two issues of NWT were sent to a person with similar journalistic experience of Swedish newsrooms. This journalist is also a lecturer in media and journalism at Karlstad University in Sweden and has 10 years experience working in newspaper and broadcast newsrooms. In the NWT for Wednesday October 3 2001, she identified the same six articles as in our sample plus another ten, making the total 16. In the NWT for Friday October 5 2001, she picked out the same six as we did plus another 19 stories making a total of 24. In our view this is sufficient to indicate that our selection method is sound. The discrepancy is explained by the fact that the independent reader also identified articles where there was no explicit textual reference to a source document, but where the information would most likely have come from documents acquired by the reporter using FoI. Interviews and surveys conducted in the earlier mentioned studies at NWT further confirm that between 30% and 50% of the journalistic content in the paper is based on information gathered using FoI. In sum, the method of sampling the FoI based articles was triangulated, using a second reader replicating the method, the interviews and surveys confirmed the sample size, as did observations of journalistic practice in the NWT newsroom during June 2001. As Ericson et al point out: ‘a full range of methodologies are required to capture this process/product relation [the creation of news], including those associated with the techniques of ethnography and those associated with the techniques of content analyses’ (Ericson et al 1987, 77).

Once the 44 NWT articles were clearly confirmed as being sourced from FoI-gained documents, they were then sorted into 11 news-topic categories. These were: Politics (15 stories), Health (9), Environment (4), Education (4), Business (3), Employment (3), Childcare (2), Politics/Business (1), Refugee issues (1), Youth (1), and Sport (1). At this point, we attempted to make as exact a match as possible with stories from TWA in the same month. On average 1.9 non-FoI-based articles per TWA issue were drawn to match the NWT sample. In the categories Politics, Health, Business and Refugee issues, there was an abundance of articles. The sampling method was to select TWA stories from the same date – or as close as possible to the same date – as the Swedish articles. In the fields of Childcare,

Environment, Education, Youth and Employment, every single TWA article found was needed to match the Swedish sample. In the Childcare category, one of the Swedish articles had to be dropped from the sample since only two stories in this field could be found in the TWA for the month. Generally the 'soft news' categories were much less common in TWA compared to NWT. One category that was quite common in both papers was Crime. However, due to the vastly different judicial systems in Sweden and WA, and the very different way FoI applies to those systems, it was decided to leave that category out. Clearly this area deserves a study of its own. This will require a much-needed model to compare the two judicial systems, which the scope of this study is too limited to accommodate.

TWA keeps a record of the number of FoI requests that have been submitted by its reporters. The record-keeping started in February 1994. By the end of 2001, 327 FoI requests had been lodged. That gives an average of 47 requests per year, compared with our conservative estimate of NWT's 44 FoI-based articles during just one month.

Identifying information acquired via FoI in TWA is more straightforward compared to NWT. This is explained by the fact that FoI use by Swedish journalists has become institutionalised in that it has been incorporated into the local journalistic culture, as described above, and is considered the norm. This is further illustrated by the fact that, if a Swedish government agency refuses a reporter access, this is considered an anomaly and, at times, it can become newsworthy in its own right. Two of the original NWT articles had to be withdrawn from the sample for this reason: their topic was FoI itself at two government agencies (Dahlström 2001, 6; NWT 2001, 4). In the whole month, only one of the TWA articles contained FoI-based information and this illustrates why it is quite easy to identify FoI use in the paper. The story dealt with the Northbridge tunnel and the payment for residential properties to construct the road and it explicitly mentioned FoI sourcing: 'Documents obtained under Freedom of Information indicate that at the time of the resumptions, Main Roads was working with a \$35 million dollar budget for resumptions even though preliminary valuations said at least \$50 million was needed' (Robb 2001, 3). Hence, FoI use in TWA to acquire information is considered unusual. It appears to give an article more credibility and independence to the extent that it has become practice among TWA reporters to explicitly declare the fact that FoI has been used to access source material.

The coding of the data was divided into base-data coding and analytical coding; with the latter geared towards answering our initial research questions. The base-data coding consisted of factual information: paper, date, headline, headline font size, what page the article was on, and number of paragraphs. Headline size and page number are a measure of the relative importance given to the article: larger headline size and lower page number indicates a more newsworthy and important article, and vice versa. The number of paragraphs in the article is the main unit of measure in quantitative terms. The analytical coding consisted of the above-mentioned news categories to indicate in what areas of reporting FoI was used and to provide a basis on which to generate the corresponding sample from TWA. When both samples were complete, all articles were then analytically coded according to the following parameters.

PS: Number of paragraphs to first reference to a source. The rationale here is that the more important and credible a documented or oral source is, the earlier it will tend to be mentioned in the article. This provides a rough measure of the reporter's confidence in his or her main source for the story. For example, a source reference after paragraph three would tend to indicate low reporter confidence in the source.

NPAS: Number of paragraphs attributed to source. This provides a measure of how much of a story is the reporter's 'opinion' and how much is explicitly sourced. For instance, fewer than 50% of the paragraphs not being referred to source would indicate poor sourcing and high opinion on part of the reporter.

QDP: Number of paragraphs that use direct quotations from documents. This shows how much of the sourcing uses direct quotations from documents. It also indicates that the reporter is in possession of a relevant document.

PDP: Number of paragraphs that paraphrase documents. This is another indicator of how much of the sourcing of information comes from documents. It also indicates that the reporter is likely to be in possession of the relevant document.

QDOSP: Number of paragraphs that quote directly from a named oral source. This provides an alternative to relying on documents for sourcing and is relatively high in credibility since the source is named.

PDOSP: Number of paragraphs paraphrased from a direct oral source. As above, except that a different writing technique is involved. The source is still named.

QIDOSP: Number of paragraphs quoted from an indirect oral source. Here, the source is not named: ‘According to a government source the minister’s accounts where not in order. He said, “She is really going to have to deal with this. The sooner the better”’. This displays lower credibility than the above categories.

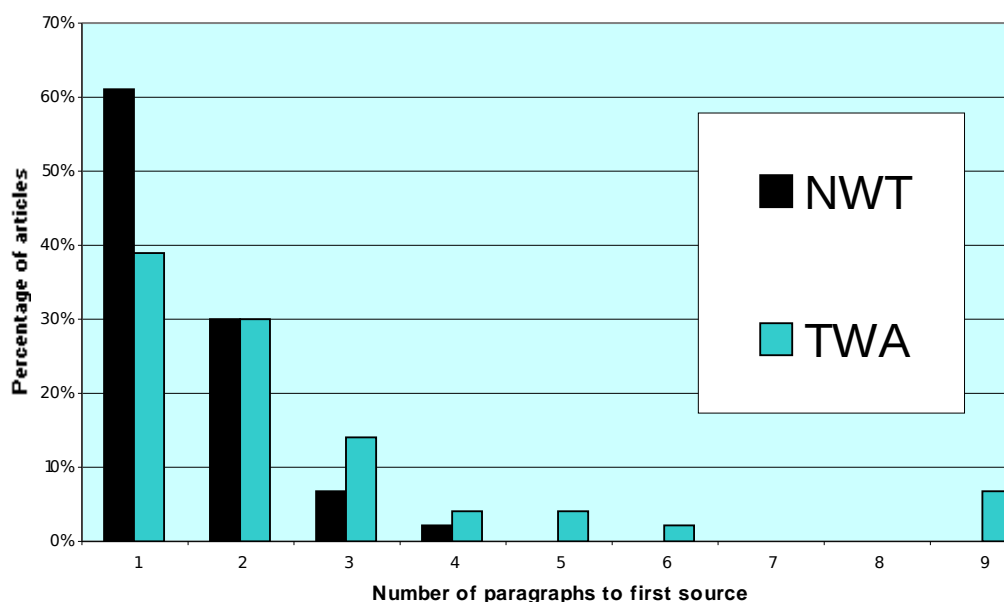
PIDOSP: Number of paragraphs paraphrased from an indirect oral source. Here, the source is not named and what the source has said is not quoted but put into the reporter’s own words. This makes it difficult for a reader to verify the source. It indicates low source credibility.

The aim of these analytic coding categories was to achieve a quantitative measure (a sheer number of paragraphs) that also approximately indicates the quality (plausibility) of the sourcing from a reader’s perspective. All 88 articles were coded according to the above system, given a unique document number and entered into the QSR-NUD•IST relational database program. The database currently consists of 113 nodes but is still under expansion and is available on request from the authors.

Findings

The number of findings generated by this study would have been close to impossible without the use of NUD•IST. The software provides an excellent overview of the data and the various search options and intersect possibilities would have taken months to generate manually even with a database as limited as the one created in this study. The smallest unit of measure in the study is paragraphs. In the base data, the number of paragraphs in each article, was entered and the total number of paragraphs in each paper matched reasonably well. The 44 NWT stories consisted of a total of 590 paragraphs, while the corresponding figure for TWA was 597. Another indication that the two samples were comparable is that 21 of the 44 NWT articles turned out to be between 12-17 paragraphs in length, while 24 of the 44 TWA stories were 14-18 paragraphs in length.

Table 2: Paragraphs to first source



The finding for the first analytical coding, PS, the number of paragraphs it takes before the first source is mentioned in an article, is presented in Table 2. Clearly the NWT reporters put more emphasis on referring to their main source as early as possible, preferably in the first paragraph, and this is the case for 61% of the NWT stories. By comparison, only 39% of TWA stories have a source reference in the first paragraph. Furthermore, no NWT articles have the first source reference later than paragraph four, whereas some of the TWA articles have the first source reference as late as paragraphs five and six and, in two cases, we have to read on until paragraph nine before the reader is introduced to the reporter's source. Arguably, this indicates that the Swedish journalists generally have more confidence in their sources and take it as important to disclose their sources as early as possible.

This is to some extent further verified by the NPAS-measure (number of paragraphs attributed to sources) finding: 74.5% of the paragraphs in the NWT articles are attributed to source (documented or oral). The corresponding figure for TWA is 62.3%. The difference is 12.2%. Viewed as a total figure, this does not seem particularly noteworthy. However, when the sourcing is broken down further, the two main findings of the study become clear.

40.5% of the NWT paragraphs fall under the PDP-measure: the number of paragraphs that paraphrase documents. (An example would be: ‘The senior public servants further state in their report that the conduct of the council member is not illegal, but highly inappropriate’ (Martinsson 2001, 4)). The equivalent figure for TWA is 10.7%. Hence, it is safe to assume that paraphrasing of documents in the possession of the reporter is the main source for the NWT reporters. This is further confirmed by the fact that the above figures are close to reversed for the PDOSP-measure. Here, TWA reporters’ main type of sourcing becomes clear: paraphrased direct oral source. 36.6% of the sourcing in the TWA articles come from this category, compared to 14% for NWT. Tables 3A and 3B show breakdowns of these two sourcing categories for political articles, 15 from each paper.

Table 3A: Main source in political articles

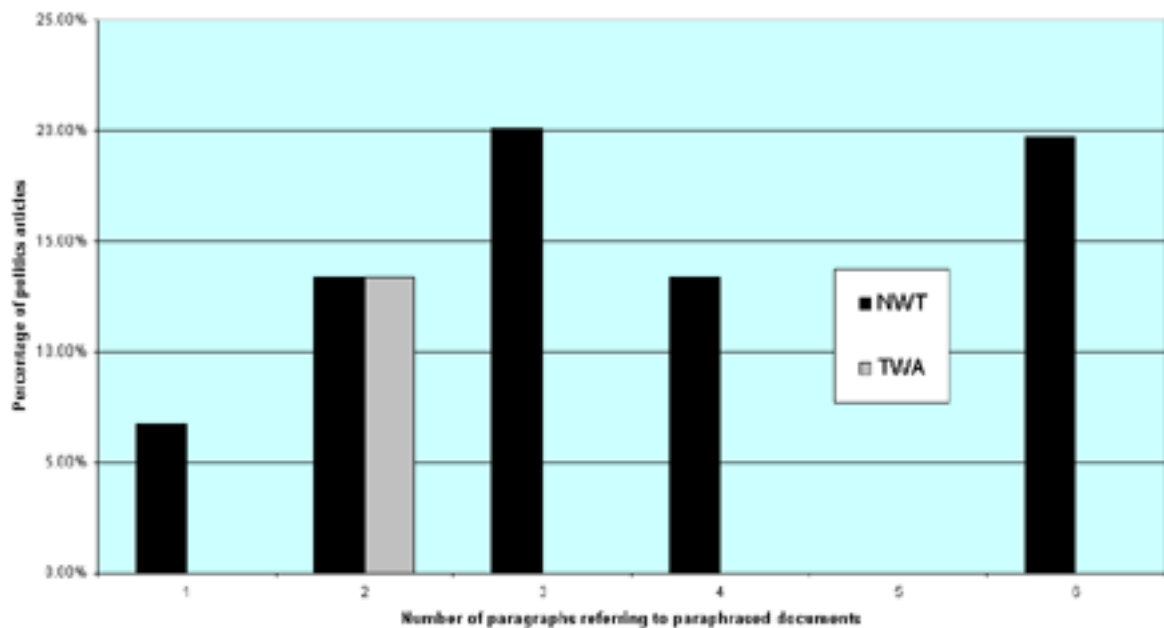
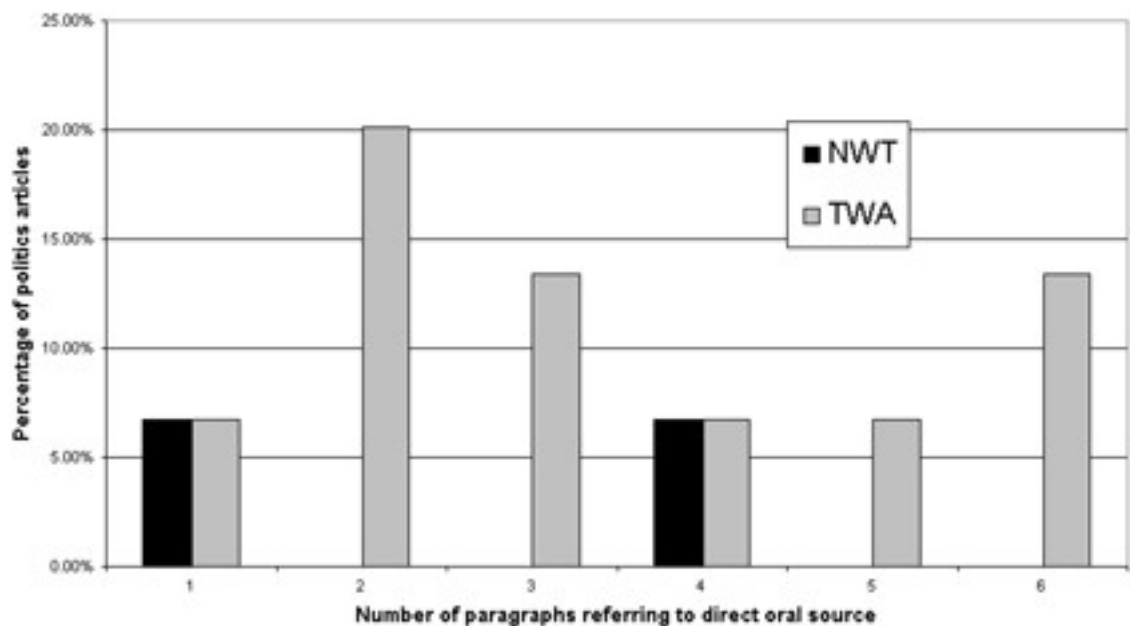


Table 3B: Main source in politics articles



These tables clearly illustrate that the NWT political reporters base their sourcing on documents (only 12% of the TWA articles use this type or sourcing). By comparison, Table 3B illustrates the dominant sourcing technique used by the TWA political reporters: paraphrased direct oral source. So, the main sourcing category for NWT is based on paraphrasing of documents, while TWA relies mainly on paraphrasing of oral sources. This is quite significant since earlier studies by Ericson et al have shown that reporters in general, and to a large extent, shy away from using actual documents, even in environments such as the United States and Canada that have FoI laws closer to the Swedish regime (Ericson et al 1987, 258). The other main news-category, health, has a very similar sourcing profile.

Again the most important question is why? The above findings indicate that part of the answer may be two sides to the same coin. A far-reaching FoI regime such as that in Sweden creates a journalistic work practice, or methodology, that incorporates the search for and retrieval of documents from government agencies. A Swedish journalist would be very uncomfortable writing a story that could not (at least to some extent) be verified by documents. There is a long-standing tradition passed on by generations of journalists in seeking information from official documents and, above all, knowing how to interpret them. This search for and understanding of government documents is verified by one of the political reporters at NWT interviewed for the study mentioned earlier (see note 1). By the same token, The West Australian journalists were promised a new journalistic

tool when the WA FoI act was passed in 1992. The tool is there but few journalists use it since the turnaround time is not considered viable (see the 'FoI in Sweden and WA' section, above). This could be the main reason for the difference in main sourcing between the Swedish and Western Australian papers.

The quoted document (QDP) and quoted indirect oral source (QIDOSP) categories were both negligible. And, first glance, this also seems to be true for the paraphrased indirect oral source (PIDOSP) category: NWT had 0% and TWA had 0.8% (5 paragraphs of 597). However, the fact that this very low credibility sourcing exists at all in TWA indicates a lack of definitely nameable sources. It further strengthens the hypothesis that a functioning FoI system provides journalists with more sourcing options and arguably with a more independent position towards the public and semi-public authorities they scrutinise.

A further look at the categories discloses one anomaly of importance. The bulk of the articles fell into the politics and health news-types, which is fairly predictable. One would assume that reporters would use FoI most successfully to gain access to documents relating to these government-affiliated areas. However, the Swedish articles also spill into areas such as business and sport. The single NWT sport article in the sample uses FoI to extensively expose a soccer club's mismanaged funds in terms of drafting of foreign players and neglecting proper accounting which, in turn, led to the club not fulfilling its employer and tax commitments. In this case, the reporter used FoI laws to gain access to relevant documents held by the Swedish taxation office (Carlsson 2001, 27).

Another example is found in the NWT business sample. Here, one article starts out similarly to the way TWA might have reported on the same issue – that a major private investor had purchased a large number of apartment buildings in central Karlstad. But the article goes on to use FoI to gain access to documents from the state-run archive of real estate owners. This enables the reporter to turn a business news story into a story of more general relevance and reach. It enables him to exactly identify which buildings have been bought by the investor, so that the tenants can know that they have a new landlord – something they may otherwise never have found out. In the article, the reporter also asks the new owner if he is planning major renovations and, if so, whether this will affect the rent (Martinsson 2001, 4).

Conclusion and further studies

The overarching research question in this study is: to what extent, if at all, do the different FoI systems in Sweden and WA influence journalistic content? The general answer is that there is a difference and that this is most clearly shown in the different way reporters in Sweden and WA source the information in their articles. 40.5% of the paragraphs examined in the Swedish newspaper rely on paraphrasing of actual documents acquired from government agencies as their main source; while the Western Australian main source is paraphrasing of oral sources – 36.6%. The study also shows that the Swedish reporters' use of FoI extends beyond political reporting. Business reporters can, for instance, obtain documents held by government agencies containing information about companies to complement the public relations information put out by those companies. This also applies to the public sector, where Swedish reporters can decide to verify and double-check press releases put out by government press officers. The inbuilt high-speed access regime in Sweden, described earlier in this paper, makes the Swedish FoI laws a viable journalistic tool. By comparison, the cumbersome structure of the WA equivalent is the main explanation for its poor uptake by local journalists. The far-reaching FoI regime in Sweden has led to a journalistic work culture (and its ensuing news-content) that is far more independent in its structure compared to WA. The following passage from Marsh sums up the WA FoI situation:

The withholding of information, and, what is equally important, the power to release information at an opportune moment, are very powerful weapons in the hands of the politician in office, and his staying in office may indeed depend on the maintenance of that power (Marsh 1987, 2; emphasis added).

The key term here is 'independence'. The Swedish reporters have journalistic tools, to a much larger extent than their WA colleagues, which allow them to independently seek and obtain information that can verify or contradict official versions on most levels of society, from politics to the private sector. In our view, the most important conclusion of this study is that it shows the Swedish journalists to be less dependent on what Ericson et al define as the 'deviance defining elite' (1987, 345-367). This is illustrated in the study by the WA journalists' greater dependence on oral sources for their information. One argument against this could be that the documents produced by government agencies in Sweden are a product of the joint efforts of members of the said 'deviance defining elite'. Even if this is the case, it is also true that the documents in question have not been 'sanitised' by press officers to suit a specific message

and they can be searched for and acquired totally independently by reporters. As mentioned above, Swedish journalists still have practically uncensored access to government records, archives and mail. Put simply, there is more everyday investigative reporting in the Swedish paper. Several of the articles in the Swedish sample contain information of a calibre that would be considered to be of an investigative nature in WA, even though they are considered locally as routine reportage.

Currently the database created for this study consists of 113 NUD•IST nodes – areas of investigation and coding. This has produced some valuable initial findings as described in this paper. However, perhaps the most important findings are still to come. By using the powerful search and Boolean indexing tools in NUD•IST, a number of articles with corresponding base data can be identified. In future studies, this will form the basis for a discursive analysis investigating the journalistic language used in the two papers. The main question would be whether there is a difference in the ‘confidence level’ in the language used in the two papers based on the quality of the information acquired for the articles.

There are other areas not covered by this study that deserve further attention. As already mentioned, crime reporting is such an area. In addition, the database can most likely also be used as a starting point for a wider project examining how the Westminster style government and the non-Westminster (Swedish) system affect journalistic practice via FoI legislation and public service tradition.

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